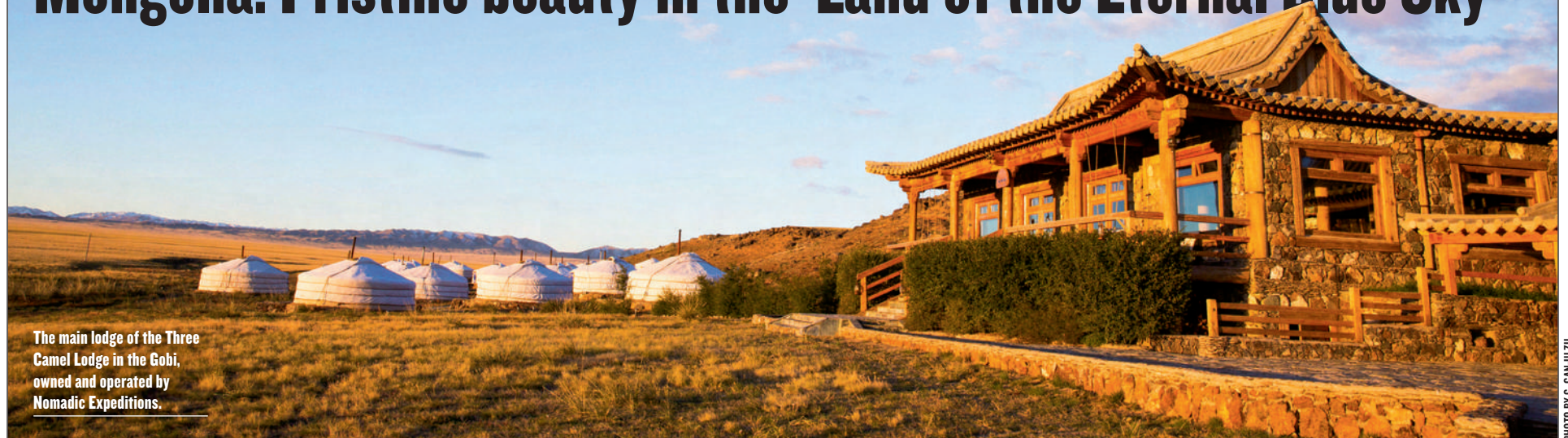


Mongolia: Pristine beauty in the 'Land of the Eternal Blue Sky'



The main lodge of the Three Camel Lodge in the Gobi, owned and operated by Nomadic Expeditions.

PHOTO BY G. GAN-ULZI

By Patricia Schultz

There are few places of undisturbed beauty left on this earth, where the inroads of tourism are still nascent and the guarantee of adventure comes free of risk (or WiFi).

Mongolia is one such place, its wide-open steppes home to a famously hospitable and good-natured people who follow a peaceful if hardscrabble lifestyle little-changed over time.

Possessing a last-place-on-earth allure that is not easy or inexpensive to access, it shows up on the bucket lists of veteran

travelers. It certainly did on mine.

Mongolia is the least densely populated independent country in the world, a once-nomadic country at a crossroads: Vast numbers of livestock herders are moving to the capital city of Ulaanbaatar after a recent raft of summertime droughts and flock-devastating winters.

The discovery of a treasure trove of natural resources, including copper, gold and coal, attracts them to the big city with the promise of work opportunities and running water.

"Vast numbers" is something of an exaggeration, as the entire country — nearly

two-and-a-half times the size of Texas — has a population closer to that of Chicago, about 3 million. Around half of them are now living in or near this sprawling city of snarled traffic, construction cranes and sleek Armani stores.

Although Ulaanbaatar, aka UB, has its own curious charm, no one comes to Mongolia to linger there.

Our Nomadic Expeditions group of 15 returned to the city's Genghis Khan Airport a number of times when making connections to the country's far-flung corners. (The pronunciation of Hunnu, one of the

country's efficient domestic airlines, provided us with our "Who knew?" inside joke when finding Snickers in the middle of nowhere, or when discovering that Genghis Khan vodka was not half bad.)

It turned out the magnificent countryside we had come to see was not always so remote: We spent one night at the idyllic Gun-Galuut Nature Reserve, where the steppes merge with wetlands some 2.5 hours by car from UB ("nearby" by local standards).

En route, we stopped at the newly built 131-foot monument to Genghis Khan, a

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Nomadic family: a grandmother and grandchild beside the corral for their livestock.

PHOTO BY N. BARTANYAN

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steel-clad hilltop statue of the legendary horseman and national icon who, together with his descendants and their Mongol armies, conquered half of the known world in the 13th century and continues to invoke great national pride. The peace-loving, mostly Buddhist Mongolia we were visiting was one-fifteenth the size of his empire, which stretched from the Pacific Ocean to the heart of Europe.

There are precious few roads in this ancient land where an equestrian culture persists. The occasional two-lane highways were recently paved, but encounters with cars were infrequent.

We sped along, past endless, fenceless grasslands listening to CDs of the otherworldly music of the country's famous throat singers (it's hypnotic), transfixed by the tersely blue sky and the changing configurations of white clouds that unfurled across its expanse.

Called the Land of the Eternal Blue Sky, it is reminiscent of Montana's Big Sky country for its light, space and emptiness — but on a more colossal scale. The magic continues at night when the stargazing is astonishing, thanks to a dense black backdrop devoid of city lights and pollution.

Mongolia deserves to be seen soon. It is impossible to ignore the economic surge and changes wrought by the mining boom that has made this one of the world's fastest-growing economies. In the past decade, Mongolia's gross domestic product has doubled.

And so has tourism. In the first half of 2012, some 280,000 travelers visited Mongolia. Americans comprised the fourth-largest group after those from China, Russia and South Korea. With such negligible numbers, foreign visitors will feel they have the undulating countryside to themselves.

Until Mongolia broke free from the Soviet orbit in 1990, it was virtually closed to the outside world.

Across the nation, independence is celebrated on and around July 11 with the Nadam Festival, the summer's biggest draw. Centered on the manly games of wrestling, horseback racing and archery, the age-old contests are often associated with the training of warriors in the time of Genghis Khan but can actually be traced back long

before that.

The televised national games take place in UB with growing pomp and glamour, and they draw on increasing numbers of tourists.

But Nomadic Expeditions, trailblazers in the business for more than 20 years, knowingly arranged for our group to enjoy the festivities in a small city in the Gobi desert, by far a more intimate and genuine experience.

If there were any other tourists, I didn't see them as we strolled and mingled, filling memory cards with photos that could never begin to capture the colors, excitement or smiling welcome offered to us at every turn.

We posed for photos with the local folks fancied up in their finest traditional dress, and checked out the most popular tent on the grounds where *airag*, the fermented mare's milk so beloved by Mongols, was being dispensed. Let's just say it's an acquired taste.

The Gobi is the world's most northern desert. It occupies the southern third of the country and — contrary to the sameness that its name might suggest — is a fascinating and varied region, one of the most diverse ecosystems on earth.

One of the trip's most rewarding treks took us through the surprisingly green Yol Valley, alongside a rushing stream whose banks were carpeted with wildflowers.

In stark contrast, the next day saw us atop the shaggy double-humped Bactrian camels common in this area, lumbering through a sweeping desert of golden dunes.

Our Jeeps then struck off (across a roadless expanse) to the red sandstone Flaming Cliffs, famous for an American paleontologist's 1923 discovery of the world's first nest

of fossilized dinosaur eggs.

Now recognized as one of the world's greatest dinosaur fossil fields (second in importance after the U.S.), we had come instead for its stunning natural beauty and delicious sunset dinner set up and awaiting us at the end of an exhilarating hike.

The Three Camel Lodge is the award-winning ecolodge of the Gobi, and indeed in all of Mongolia. Not quite glamping, it was our oasis-in-the-middle-of-nowhere home, created and professionally managed by Nomadic Expeditions.

Run entirely by a can-do Mongolian staff, it was the nicest of the trip's selection of rustic "ger" camps. The circular ger is the traditional white felt-lined tent of the nomadic herder, elsewhere called the "yurt," its Turkish name.

More rudimentary gers had also been our perfectly situated accommodation on the shore of Lake Hovsgol, the country's second-largest lake and primary freshwater resource. Mongolia's deepest lake, Hovsgol is found in the northernmost region, at the border with Russia, and shares a similar ecosystem and type of natural beauty with nearby Lake Baikal in Russian Siberia.

We spent days hiking through pristine larch and pine forests to visit the Tsaatan, the legendary reindeer people, who had set up a seasonal teepee-style tent and had a handful of handcrafted souvenirs for sale.

There was horseback riding for the daring among us, dropping in to visit local herders (their ger had a satellite dish out front, a common sight), and motorboating on incredibly crystal clear waters.

Our last afternoon was spent deconstructing a ger (with a lot of help) to illustrate just how practical it was as a traveling home for a nomadic family.

Just a word about the often-maligned Mongolian food: With meat (especially mutton) and dairy products (think yogurt, dried curd and cheese) the mainstays of the national diet, we didn't expect our ger camps to offer fine dining (though some restaurants in UB came close). But selections were plentiful, fresh and kept everyone sated and happy.

The occasional appearance of tourist concessions such as peanut butter, bacon and lettuce prompted more of those "who knew?" moments. We appreciated the constant attempts by our Mongolian hosts to show how welcomed we were in their remarkable Land of the Eternal Blue Sky.

Patricia Schultz is the author of "1,000 Places to See Before You Die," a New York Times best-seller.



Above: The shaggy Bactrian camels are distinctive for their double humps and are common to the Gobi Desert. Right: The crystal-clear waters of Lake Hovsgol, Mongolia's deepest lake, at the border with Siberia.

PHOTOS BY D. GERELOV

